

Amid Rising Tensions, Forum Promotes Friendship Among Religions

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Haifa, Israel—More than 20 representatives of the Jewish and Arab faiths gathered for the Jerusalem Interfaith Forum on October 20, 2015, to express their mutual hope for peace. They also shared their determination to continue their efforts to promote peace and harmony among Jews and Arabs in Israel.

The event, which was held at the Greek Orthodox Church of Mar Elias in Haifa, was hosted by Father Masoud Abu-Hatoum, archimandrite of the Greek Malekite Church, who welcomed the guests. He said that people have no choice but to live together and therefore must learn to live in peace with each other. Referring to the recent violence in Israel, he also said no one wants to live in fear of being attacked, whether the person is Jewish, Muslim or Christian. Fr. Abu-Hatoum concluded by talking about our responsibility for the future generations: to bridge the gaps of hate and fear and learn to live peacefully together.

Rabbi Edgar Nof, chair of the Bridges for Hope, a non-profit in Haifa, and rabbi of Netan-ya Congregation spoke about the responsibility of the Jewish people to be aware of the needs and sensitivities of minorities in Israel. Rabbi Nof also said the Druze and Christian Arabs in Israel can act as mediators and help the Jews and Muslims reach peace.

Sheik Ali Birani, president of Jerusalem Interfaith Forum, spoke about the history of Israel. Many things have changed in the past several centuries: religions have risen and fallen and conquerors have come and gone. But some things are eternal and will never change: a baby is still born after nine months in his/her mother's womb; whether someone is Jewish, Muslim, Christian, or Hindu; all men and women, whether black; white; yellow; or red have two eyes, one nose and ten fingers. These are universal truths that will never change. Human beings' value also will never change. We should care for others and learn to leave in peace and harmony, he said.

Prof. Yishai Lachter, president of Bridges of Hope, spoke about the need for a clear distinction between good and evil, and that good must find the way to protect itself from evil. There should be tolerance, but zero tolerance for racism and violence.

The participants then spoke about how they are promoting peace: some are teaching students and talking with members of their community; others are involved in projects, including ones that promote friendship among Jewish and Arabs.

Some of the participants expressed their despair over the situation of violence in the country and see no signs of hope that the future will be better. Others were inspired to see they are not alone in their hope for peace. Prof. Lachter talked about the value of each person in the room. The pictures and experience they had at this meeting that they will share with their communities and friends are acts that multiply goodness, and counter the power of evil.

After the forum, the participants visited an Arab-Christian school, where they were met by the principal, Mr. William Abu-Shkara, who gave an introduction about the school. The participants also spoke with some of the students, and Rabbi Nof and Sheik Ali Birani delivered a message to them, expressing love and hope for a peaceful future for them.